

# Star Wars: Knight Errant: Influx -- An Original Short Story

[Share](#)  [Email](#)  | [Archives](#)

October 19, 2010

By John Jackson Miller



*"Influx" takes place in the Grumani sector in 1,032 B.B.Y., immediately before the events of Star Wars: Knight Errant #1, now available from [Dark Horse Comics](#). It serves to introduce characters and themes for comics readers and readers of the forthcoming novel, due out in January from Del Rey Books.*

---

"We ought to shoot you where you stand!"

The hooded human trudged over the hill, his boots raking through the mud. "We're here," he said, keeping his voice firm. There wasn't any point in apologizing. Not in this place -- or to these people. "Just show us where our ride is."

The Daimanite Sith warriors didn't lower their rifles. Even on rain-drenched Oranessian, Lord Daiman insisted that his troopers shine their silvery combat suits every day. *This* day, the planet seemed especially intent on testing their armor. Hailstones ricocheted off them in all directions, raising such a raucous din that the first speaker -- a burn-scarred woman in worker's overalls -- had to shout to be heard.

"You're not where you're supposed to be, pilot!" Stepping between the warriors, the woman flashed a hand-held light in the face of the newcomer, a rugged man in his fifties. "You were supposed to be here for flight prep twenty minutes ago," she yelled. "What in blazes were you doing down in the mud flats?"

"Our shuttle was damaged in the storm," the arrival said, pointing over the hillcrest. Two similarly cloaked companions arrived behind him, both flashing their identification badges. "We landed where we could. What does it matter? We're here." Ice blue eyes squinting, Vannar Treece surveyed the surroundings. Beyond the scabrous ground crew chief and the four sentries loomed a massive, multi-gunned Sith transport, waiting for its flight team. Identical transports were already lifting off in the distance, climbing over the towering nuclear furnaces that provided fuel for Daiman's vessels at this waystation. The flames atop the massive permacrete cones provided the only lighting for the area, forcing the ground crews to use their helmet-lights even at high noon -- which it was now.

*Welcome back to Sith Space, Vannar thought. See the sights -- if you really want to.*

Vannar took a step toward the waiting transport, only to be blocked by the ground team leader. Shining her light at his gloved hands, the age-worn woman flew into a rage. "Where's your dispatch case? You'd better not tell me you've come all the way here without it!"

Vannar's short female companion stepped forward. Hazel eyes flashing beneath her cowl, she raised her hand before the Sith crew chief. "We don't need a dispatch case."

"You sure as blazes do, little missy!" The ground crew leader ripped at the newcomer's hood, revealing a girl of eighteen, dark of hair and complexion. "I don't know what they're thinking, sending younglings out here as pilots. Surely Daiman can do better than you!"

Smoldering, the girl looked urgently to Vannar. He already knew. This wasn't working.

"This isn't right," the scarred woman said, stepping back toward the troopers. "One less transport in the convoy won't make any difference. Kill them."

The quartet of warriors raised their rifles. Vannar's companions leapt forward, light flashing in front of them. The girl reached the Daimanites first, cleaving the muzzle of the nearest warrior's weapon in two with her lightsaber. A fraction of a second later, she did the same to the sentry himself.

"What the--?" The crew chief stumbled backwards and pulled her blaster. "*Jedi!*"

Leaping out of her cloak, Kerra Holt pounced, vaulting over the second warrior's shoulders and diving for the boss. The comlink flew from the older woman's hand, burying itself in the Oranessian muck. Seeing the second sentry turning toward her, the young Jedi thrust her lightsaber backward into the crew chief's body. The woman's cry of pain was still on the air when the attacking sentry collapsed before Kerra, slain by the yellow lightsaber of Vannar Treece.

Vannar looked to the right to see Dorvin Eltrom, his other companion, standing over the corpses of the other two Daimanites. The Cerean removed his hood, raindrops spattering off his conical cranium. Vannar quickly extinguished his lightsaber and scanned the area. The hail had turned to a cooling rain, the downpour and darkness combining to screen their melee from the massive service hangar nearly a kilometer away. *Timely*, he thought. *A good omen for a long mission's first step.*

Hair dripping, the girl knelt over the dead crew chief's body. "'Little missy?' Is that how Sith swear these days?"

"I never know what to expect," Vannar said, chuckling to himself. Part of the novelty of this mission would be seeing Kerra's response to Sith space, territory she'd studied so long from afar. Kerra had been under his tutelage for most of the decade since he helped to evacuate her from this region. Now, she'd had her first contact.

It was no surprise that Kerra's Force skills had gone undetected when she lived the Grumani sector. With the Republic abandoning much of the Outer Rim, Jedi scouts were no longer identifying potential students in those regions. As far as Vannar was concerned, it was almost better for Sith slaves never to learn about their potential Force talents, lest they be pressed into service as Sith adepts. Anything was better than that. But Kerra had escaped, and while Vannar would have wanted to remain a part of her life regardless of whether she had Jedi potential, the fact had made it possible for him to play an active role in her education.

She had taken to the training quickly. Her mind and body were all she had left in the galaxy; these, she committed fully to absorbing skills and knowledge. Vannar wasn't her Master in the formal sense; she didn't really have one. A lot of the regular ways of doing things had changed by necessity in recent times. With Knights needed at the front, there simply weren't enough teachers to go around; Padawans tended to apprentice for short periods under whoever was available. But Vannar, as much father as mentor, had made a point of following her progress. Once he began waging his own private war in Sith space, Kerra had begged to assist him in any way possible.

While there was no thought of taking the adolescent on any of his missions, Vannar found that teenage Kerra was helpful to his cause in innumerable ways. She was an organizational dynamo, helping him to transform his lofty visions into concrete actions. He had the connections and the personal magnetism necessary to attract followers and material support; Kerra made sure it got where it needed to go. He was sure she'd made it possible for him to mount one additional operation a year. None of those were grand missions to free her homeland -- Vannar wondered if anything could do that -- but it was making a contribution.

And now, years later, she was finally here.

"I'm guessing she's got what we're looking for," Kerra said, sorting through the items attached to the dead woman's belt. Finding a control device, she turned to face the huge transport and pressed a button. The massive forward hatchway groaned open, revealing a yawning cargo area inside.

As their intelligence reports had suggested, the giant transport was empty, waiting for a flight crew that would never arrive. Vannar raised his comlink to his mouth. "Objective vessel secured. *Influx* begin. Team may approach."

"Influx confirmed. Stand by."

Vannar's full Jedi team was stationed beyond the next ridge, with the wreckage of the small personnel shuttle they had intercepted during their approach to Oranessian from Republic space. Intercepting the flight crew and arriving in their stead had gotten Vannar and his companions close enough to the Sith transport landing zone to secure it. The big transport -- a Daimanite Heavy-Lift Starcrosier, if the information in the reports was accurate -- would be his team's ride for the rest of Operation Influx. Vannar slapped the side of the cargo door as Dorvin dashed up the steps, headed for his intended station in the cockpit. The ship would be a pretty big gift to a Republic Defense Ministry starved for information about what Daiman's forces were flying these days. But it was also completely secondary to the mission's main goal.

Kerra had selected the name for the operation, as she'd done for all of them since she was thirteen. It was kind of a good luck charm, Vannar thought. Her original idea had been to call this operation "Deadlock" until Vannar pointed out that, while stalemating the squabbling Sith Lords against one another was, indeed, one of their goals in this mission, it was a poor thing to root openly for. When the Sith battled the Republic, at least one side was usually looking to avoid civilian casualties. When Sith Lords fought each other, as Daiman and his hated brother Odion did, anyone caught between was in grave danger. Indeed, nihilist Odion lived to mow down innocents. Another sick Sith Lord.

Standing guard at the bottom of the ramp, he watched as Kerra scrunched her nose at the foul Oranessian air. It was the first time she hadn't been in motion since they left the jumping-off point in the Republic.

"Fly and die for Lord Daiman," Kerra said, looking back at the corpses. It was far from her first kill; Vannar knew that was years earlier. But she seemed troubled. "Why is anyone willing to do anything for Daiman?"

"He's the one in charge."

"He's mentally ill," Kerra said.

Vannar nodded. Anyone who imagined himself the creator of the universe, with all other organics simply soulless automatons placed here (by himself, of course) for his own amusement definitely had some issues to work out. Most of the warlords out here did. But Vannar wasn't really interested in the state of the health care system for Sith Lords.

Neither was Kerra, he saw, who changed the subject quickly. "What's a dispatch case?"

"No idea," Vannar said. The ground crew chief had asked them about it, earlier.

"It could be important," Kerra said, looking back at the dead woman's body, drenched in the mire.

"It could also be nothing," Vannar said. He knew what was coming on. Kerra was driven and detail-oriented -- and nothing drove her like realizing there was a detail she hadn't considered. He'd seen that send her into a spin in her younger days, but she'd been better about that lately. Still...

"Are you sure you're all right, Kerra?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry -- no first-day jitters."

"Oh, I wouldn't have expected them. You changed tactics pretty well with the crew chief back there," he said. Kerra's attempt at persuasion didn't seem to have worked, but he wouldn't hold that against her. She never liked using the Force to influence others. It was just part of her makeup. "Still, it is your first mission..."

"I'm fine," Kerra said, tromping off in the mud to watch for the arrival of the rest of the team. "I just didn't like posing as Sith."

Vannar laughed. "Without subterfuge, we wouldn't get very far," he called after her. "This isn't a place where you can be yourself. Not for very long, anyway!"

\*\*\*

Kerra looked out from the over-sized cockpit of the Sith transport and blanched. Vannar was right. If this polluted, ravaged world was any indication, this sector had completely forgotten any good that the Jedi might ever have done here. The Jedi had pulled back when the Republic did, conserving their numbers to prevent an all-out Sith assault on the Core Worlds. If not for the efforts of Vannar Treece and his volunteers, there wouldn't be any Jedi activity in the Grumani sector at all. And Vannar only staged quick-hit raids with the quiet, unofficial consent of the Jedi Order -- rarely anything with far-reaching ramifications.

But this mission was something more -- or, it promised to be. Kerra looked back at the command deck of the transport, now alive with her Jedi companions. So many of the brightest stars of the Order were here, it almost looked like a satellite Jedi Council. Some, like the Trandoshan, Mrssk, she knew from previous Treece operations; others, like the Quarren Master, Berluk, she knew only by reputation. Treece had used the gravity of this operation to call in every favor he was owed. And it hadn't been a difficult case to make. Lord Daiman had struck baradium.

Necessary for thermal detonators and other weapons, baradium wasn't something a Sith Lord could trade for. The shortage of it acted as a logistical roadblock to evil ambitions. Many of the warring princelings had long since exhausted any commercial mines developed during earlier times, taking instead to stealing whatever supplies their neighbors had. But if the intelligence reports Vannar had recently received were true, Daiman had found the largest baradium strike in more than a century right in his own backyard, on agrarian Chelloa.

Vannar hadn't told her much about the source of his information, except to say that he trusted it absolutely. And everyone Vannar spoke with understood the implications: should Daiman weaponize the baradium of Chelloa, he could easily best not only brother Odion, but all his warring neighbors. And that, ultimately, would mean trouble for the Republic, if its enemies joined behind a single leader.

The Jedi would have to beat them to that -- by uniting behind Vannar. Who, as always, had a plan ready to go.

Operation Influx was simple. Striking first at the Daimanite transport hub on Oranessian, the Jedi team would steal one of the massive ore transports heading to Chelloa. There, they would knock the baradium shipping depot offline before a kilogram of the stuff made it to any of Daiman's munitions factories nearer to the front line. It wasn't a permanent solution, but they didn't have the luxury of waiting for one. "Interdiction buys time," Vannar had said.

It felt good to be in the field with the team, instead of seeing everyone off at the spaceport. And Vannar's protectiveness aside, most of them seemed happy to see her along, too. She'd worked with so many of the volunteers in the preparations for past missions, getting to know them and what moved them. A few, like her, had been forced to flee from territory under Sith occupation. Others were followers of Vannar's strategic vision; for someone not on the Jedi Council, there were few Jedi with more influence.

Dorvin's reasons for being here were more complicated, she knew. His Cerean species was a microscopic minority on Coruscant, their community all that remained from a corporate slave-raid on their homeworld centuries earlier. Barred from repatriation by Cereans fearful of technological contamination, Dorvin's kind lived with alienation every day of their lives. Helping others return home meant something.

Sliding out from beneath the control console -- an uncomfortable position for someone with his pointed skull -- Dorvin smiled up at her. "It was pleasing to see you in action, Kerra Holt," he said in his regal-sounding voice. "You do the chancellor proud."

"What?"

"You've got a green lightsaber," Dorvin said. "An uncommon choice among today's recruits. Do you aspire to become a consular, like Chancellor Genarra?"

"No." Kerra had never met the Republic leader, one of a string of Jedi chosen to lead the body through an era that called for extreme measures. But she had certainly sent her enough reports on Vannar's behalf.

"Ah." Dorvin twirled the end of his moustache. "Then perhaps you honor someone from our history. Will you make me guess?"

"No, actually, I just grabbed a crystal from the top of the pile."

"Hmm."

Visibly disappointed, Dorvin sniffed and slid back beneath the control console. Kerra shook her head. Dorvin lived for tradition, taking comfort in it. Many did. But Kerra never had time for the trappings, trying instead to learn all the skills the Jedi could teach her as quickly as possible. It was the better path, she thought. Rituals belonged to a time when the Jedi hadn't been at war for all living memory. She'd excused herself within seconds of the end of her knighting ceremony to get the staging area. What good were flowery words when people were suffering?

"I have a problem," said Dorvin.

"What?"

Dorvin poked his head back out from beneath the console. "It's a Vannar problem. Call for him, please."

\* \* \*

Everything stopped when Vannar Treece entered a room. Even this group of luminaries, Kerra noticed.

The darkling cloak of the Sith pilot gone, Vannar stood again in his usual white tunic and muted gray vest. Blond hair going to a genteel white, he made every effort to look like just another Jedi. But clearly, that wasn't so. After so many years as his ward, Kerra sometimes forgot how much weight Vannar carried with others. Polite as he was, Dorvin certainly didn't intend her any offense in going over her head, even though she was, technically, Vannar's principal aide. It was just understood. There were problems, and there were *Vannar* problems.

"All right, Dorvin," Vannar said, surrounded by his watchful colleagues in the cockpit. "Tell me again, without the technical part."

"It's bad."

"That's not technical enough."

"The navicomputer won't boot up."

"Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

"No, I mean it *can't* boot up," Dorvin said. He swung open the cover panel. A gaping hole existed in the device, wide enough for the Cerean to put his arm through. "See here? It's missing the activation cylinder!"

Vannar stared.

"It's like a key," Dorvin said. "Without it, this ship goes nowhere."

Standing by the doorway where she'd been since fetching their leader, Kerra hid her clenched fists. It didn't make any sense. The other transports were already leaving for Chelloa. This one was ready to go; it was just waiting for its flight crew. It wasn't under repair.

It should be whole.

"Did we miss something?" Vannar said. "When we took out the flight crew, were they carrying something?"

Kerra's eyes narrowed. *The dispatch case.*

That had to be it. Kerra hadn't been the one to shoot down the little shuttle carrying the expected flight crew, but she had entered the wreckage to retrieve their cloaks and identification badges. Weakly, she spoke up. "There was a case trapped under one of the consoles," she said. "I thought it was a personal item."

Dorvin looked back at her. "How big?"

"That big." Swallowing, she pointed to the hole in the control console.

A murmur rose from the collected Jedi. Almost every one of them was twice her age or more, their first mission long since past. She wasn't here because of Vannar -- in fact, he preferred to keep her out of harm's way. She was here because she thought of everything.

But she hadn't thought of this.

"Calm down, everyone," Vannar said, shooting Kerra a look and a calming nod. "Things must have changed since I was here last," he said. He approached the defunct console. "Why wouldn't they keep the activation cylinders with the ships? What are the flight crews doing carrying them?"

The leather-faced Trandoshan spoke up. "Sssecurity," Mrssk said. "Daiman doesssn't trussst anyone not to desssert."

"Or to join the other side," Kerra said, daring to pipe up.

Vannar leaned against a chair back and exhaled. "It does make sense," he said. "Daiman's flight crews get a lot more indoctrination than his ground crews do. If he's afraid of anyone stealing a transport, this would address that."

Kerra sagged against the door jamb. They'd suspected there might be some additional security, beyond the identification badges. But she'd guessed that would be limited to keeping hyperspace coordinates from anyone but the pilot. The Jedi brought their own coordinates to and from Chelloa. But this was something they'd never expected. "It didn't look like anything important," Kerra said, shaking her head. "And it was stuck, after the crash." She looked up. "But I could have gotten it out."

"You can't think of everything, Kerra. These things happen," Vannar said. A few kindly faces looked back at her.

"We have the vehicle we arrived in," Dorvin said. "We don't have a part that will fit this navicomputer. But can't we do the mission with our own ship? Without the Daimanite transport?"

"They wouldn't let us near Chelloa," Vannar replied. "We've got to look like we belong there on approach." They only had an hour to enter the Chelloan system, sabotage the shipping terminal, and depart under Vannar's plan. Fighting their way into the system would alert Daiman to the danger, allowing him to redouble his guard planetside. No, they had to look like they belonged to the convoy, from start to finish. There was no other way.

Straightening, Vannar came to a decision. "We go to the fallback."



"Master Treece, no!" Kerra bolted upright. She knew the alternative plan well; she'd helped craft it. If they couldn't reach Chelloa, they had to return to the Republic, taking advantage of any opportunities that presented themselves to shoot down ore transports leaving Oranessian for Chelloa. It was much the inferior plan. They wouldn't take out more than a couple, for sure -- and Daiman could easily reroute other vessels to the mining world. Chelloa's deathworks would go online, as scheduled.

"Kerra, I don't know what else we can--"

"We can still go to Chelloa! Maybe we can hijack an ore transport in route, the same way we ambushed the flight crew!"

"That was a small personnel shuttle," Vannar said. The ore transports, by contrast, bristled with weapons. It was part of what made stealing one worthwhile.

"Or we can go back to the flight crew's ship. I can get the cylinder this time!"

"It's too far, Kerra -- and you said the ship was crushed. It might not even work any more."

"We can *try*!"

Looking uncomfortably at his listeners, Vannar stepped through the crowded cockpit. "Excuse me," he said, taking Kerra's arm and leading her into the hallway outside.

In the long shadows of the hallway, he spoke in hushed tones. "These are not my Knights, Kerra. You know that. They're on loan, more or less. I owe it to Chancellor Genarra not to waste their lives on a ten-percent plan!"

Kerra looked down the hall to the exit, and back to Vannar again. "We've come all this way," she said. "We're here. We can *do* something. We shouldn't go back."

"Are you speaking for all of us, Kerra?" Vannar said. He looked down into her eyes. "Because it sounds to me like you're speaking for yourself. And I already know: just one Jedi isn't much good to anyone here in Sith space. You won't get noticed. You won't get anywhere."

Kerra held his gaze for a moment before looking away. This was the Vannar that other people heard -- the voice of authority. She always heard it from his side, rarely on the receiving end.

Suddenly, they both heard a new voice crackling from the cockpit. Vannar and Kerra turned to look inside.

"...and you'd better get moving, Transport Four!" It was the Sith control tower, situated on the other side of the great hangar. They wouldn't have had a visual on the fight in the rain and darkness, but they certainly knew that the transport wasn't in the air. "Get moving, or we're coming over there to get *you*!"

Vannar squeezed Kerra's wrist and released it before reentering the cockpit. "OK, there's only one thing to do," he instructed. "We don't have hyperdrive, but we do have a transport. There's no sense walking the kilometers back to our ship in a monsoon." He patted the broken console. "Dorvin, close it up and get us out of here."

Kerra watched as Vannar stepped toward the forward viewport. Arms crossed behind him, he looked out upon the pouring rain. Behind him, the collected Jedi mumbled assent. In the darkness of the hallway, Kerra knew that Vannar was right.

There *was* only one thing to do.

\* \* \*

Vannar looked at the monitor. *This can't be. Not on her first mission.*

He'd gotten a flash of the girl's intentions through the Force moments after she left the hallway, before she'd reached the exit to the transport. He'd ordered Dorvin to secure all hatchways against opening from the inside -- only to hear the whoosh when the main cargo gateway opened just as the transport was lifting off. He'd forgotten Kerra still had the remote control for the door from the ground crew chief. But Kerra hadn't forgotten.

She had already landed in the mud and bounded off when he reached the opening. The transport climbing too high to jump from, Vannar had dashed upstairs to the command center. But even with altitude and the transport's external sensors, Oranessian's weather made it impossible to find a single figure on the ground.

"She can't mean to go back to where we shot down the flight crew," Vannar said, half aloud. It was too far on foot. But where else was there?

"We can't linger here, Master Treece," Dorvin said. They were sitting in mid-air, not going anywhere. It was back to their own ship or nothing. "There are dozens of Sith fighters parked beyond the hangar. If we have to fight, we'll never get off Oranessian!"

"I know, blast it!" Using a pair of macrobinoculars, he scanned futilely ahead. "I *know*. But not a moment before--"

"Wait!"

To Vannar's right, Mrssk pointed to one of the monitors looking to starboard and shouted. "Surface contact, organic! Mark two-eighty!"

"Give me the starboard gunnery cams, infrared!" Vannar said. Images flickered on the screen. There, through the telescopic sighting of the vessel's landing guns, he saw a single figure making its way from the large maintenance hangar. Fighting to bring the image into focus, Vannar was surprised to see sudden flashes of light from the contact. *Green* light.

"That's her!" Vannar yelled.

Ignoring a second, more urgent call from the Sith control tower, Vannar directed the transport down towards the besotted plain. Shaking his head, he marveled. Kerra had made her lightsaber into a beacon by turning it on and off repeatedly. Maybe one Jedi could get noticed out here -- at least by other Jedi!

\* \* \*

Kerra collapsed on the cargo deck, gasping for breath. Vannar had been ready in the open doorway to receive her, and it was a good thing, too. Dorvin, upstairs, had feared setting down again in the muck; the wiry girl had been forced to leap for the rain-slickened cargo ramp. If Vannar hadn't been right there, she would have slipped off.

The girl rolled over, rainwater streaming off her. Vannar looked at her muddied outfit. Over her Jedi uniform, Kerra wore the coveralls of the woman who'd led the ground crew -- the first casualty of her return to Sith space. With one heavy motion, Kerra pulled a large, opal tube from a long pants pocket and slapped it on the deck grating.

Vannar gaped. "Is that?"

"An activation cylinder!" Appearing behind Vannar, Dorvin reached past him and grabbed the rolling mass. "High marks to the Padawan! I mean -- to the Knight!"

Vannar knelt beside Kerra, still choking for breath. Running in that rain -- and in someone else's clothes! He couldn't imagine.

She spoke. "They had to have replacement navicomputers in the hangar," Kerra said, dripping wet. "Activation cylinders right inside. No reason to hide the keys when there's no ships attached!" Looking down at herself, she patted the Sith worker's uniform -- a uniform with a large singed tear, front and back, where the lightsaber had entered earlier. "I just had to be able to get into the door. Luckily, no one really looked at me. It's a pretty busy place."

"I bet it is," Vannar said, helping to steady his student and ward as the transport gained elevation. "But I thought you hated posing as Sith."

"I hate letting them win even more."

Vannar looked down at Kerra, amazed. Finding his comlink, he called the Cerean. "Are we in business, Dorvin?"

"Next stop, Chelloa!"

"Very well, then. Operation Influx is onto Phase Two!"

Clicking off the comlink, Vannar patted Kerra on her shoulder as she stood and walked past. "Pretty good work for the first time out," he said. "But you can see what I mean. You're a great planner, but things out here change faster than we can plan for them." He chuckled. "Maybe you should have called it Operation *In Flux*."

Shaking the water from her hair, Kerra looked back with a smirk. "Maybe I should have planned to bring a towel."

*John Jackson Miller is the writer of the Star Wars: Knight Errant comic book series from Dark Horse -- now on sale -- and the Star Wars: Knight Errant novel for Del Rey, on sale Jan. 25. Both are original stories, following the continuing adventures of Kerra Holt in Sith space. Miller ([www.farawaypress.com](http://www.farawaypress.com)) also recently concluded the fifty-issue Knights of the Old Republic comics series for Dark Horse, available in nine reprint volumes. Miller maintains a blog at StarWars.com ([blogs.starwars.com/johnjacksonmiller](http://blogs.starwars.com/johnjacksonmiller)).*

*Follow John Jackson Miller on Twitter [@jjmfaraway](https://twitter.com/jjmfaraway) and on Facebook at [facebook.com/johnjacksonmiller](https://facebook.com/johnjacksonmiller).*